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# The Chat

FALL 2011

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# THE CHAT

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Editor

Kent Fiala, 1714 Borland Road  
Hillsborough, NC 27278  
chat@carolinabirdclub.org

General Field Notes Editors

North Carolina  
South Carolina

Briefs for the Files

Associate Editor

Christina Harvey  
William Post  
Josh Southern  
Ginger Travis

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## **Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) Nesting in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina**

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**Marcus B. Simpson, Jr. and Marilyn J. Westphal**

*P. O. Box 1427, Hendersonville, NC 28793-1427*

The Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) nests in coniferous and deciduous forests across Canada and the northern and western United States. In eastern North America, the defined breeding-season range extended southward in the Appalachian Mountain system to Mt. Rogers, Virginia, until 1979, when observers began documenting the gradual expansion of the species' summer range into the Blue Ridge Province of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee (Jones and Donovan 1996; Potter and LeGrand 1980; Scott 1966; Westphal et al 2008). Despite the occurrence of Hermit Thrushes in high-elevation forests of this region, published breeding evidence south of Mt. Rogers has been limited to records of fledglings and juveniles. Our observations of an active nest in Yancey County, NC, provide additional documentation of the species' breeding ecology in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains.

### **Range expansion in the southern Blue Ridge Province of the Appalachians: historical summary and current status**

Within the Blue Ridge Province (Fenneman 1938), Hermit Thrushes are now well documented as summer residents in western boundary ranges along the North Carolina/Tennessee state line, including the Roan massif, Unaka Mountain, and the Great Smoky Mountains, with isolated reports from the Unicoi Mountains and Pond Mountain. On the eastern front range, the species occurs at Grandfather Mountain and on the Blue Ridge crest for short distances south and east from the vicinity of Black Mountain Gap. Interior transverse ranges with documented populations include the Black Mountains, Great Craggy Mountains, Pisgah Ridge, Shining Rock Ledge, Southern Great Balsam Mountains, Plott Balsam Mountains, and Northern Great Balsam Mountains. During summer months, the birds have been reported from elevations generally above 1460 m (4800 ft) up to the highest summits, including Mt. Mitchell and Clingman's Dome. The majority of breeding season records are from disturbed forests of red spruce (*Picea rubens*), Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*), and northern hardwoods.

The southernmost location in the Appalachians where the species has been consistently reported for three or more breeding seasons is along the Blue Ridge Parkway near mile 423.5, at the headwaters of the West Fork Pigeon River near Tanasee Bald (35.29617N, 82.91667W) (Westphal et al, 2008). This area, including the terrain between Silvermine Bald and Buckeye Gap, constitutes the southernmost locale in the east where the red spruce-Fraser fir community occurs (Simpson 1992). Details are from Browning

(2003); Davis (1998, 2004a, 2004b, 2005); Knight (2010); Lee et al (1985); LeGrand (1993); Southern (2009); and Westphal et al (2008). Unpublished records are from Christine Kelly (pers. comm.), Andrew Laughlin (pers. comm.), Nora Murdock (pers. comm.), William Sullivan (pers. comm.), M. B. Simpson, and M. J. Westphal (observations 2002–2011). Prior to the current report, the southernmost site where nests have been documented in the Blue Ridge province is at Mt. Rogers, VA, where 6 nests were discovered between 1979 and 2007 (Rottenborn and Brinkley 2007; Phil Shelton pers. comm.).

### **Previous breeding evidence in North Carolina and Tennessee**

Evidence that Hermit Thrushes breed in the Blue Ridge province of NC and TN is based on reports of recently fledged juveniles just east of Roan Mountain at Carver's Gap (1680 m/5512 ft), at nearby Round Bald (ca 1700 m / 5600 ft), and at Walker Knob in the Great Craggy Mountains (1658 m / 5440 ft). The first report came when Knight banded a juvenile at Carver's Gap on 12 September 1997 (Davis 1998; Knight 1997, 2010). Between 2002 and 2007 Knight subsequently netted and banded a total of 20 juveniles at Carver's Gap, with dates between 19 August and 29 September (Davis 1998, 2004a, 2005; Knight 2010). Browning (2003) provided an account of fledglings at Walker Knob, just south of Balsam Gap in the Great Craggy Mountains on 21 June 2001. At a tree-fall gap in a spruce-fir-birch forest, Browning encountered an adult carrying food to three speckled fledglings with short tails. More recently, fledged young were seen on Round Bald, just north of Carver's Gap, by Trently on 1 July 2002 and by Laughlin on 15 June 2009, when two adults were feeding a recently fledged juvenile (Knight 2010; Laughlin pers. comm.).

### **Nest site at Bald Knob Ridge**

On 18 July 2011, we discovered an active Hermit Thrush nest on the east slope of Bald Knob, near Black Mountain Gap in Yancey County, NC. Hermit Thrushes have been present at least since 2004 during the nesting season in this area and at nearby Cherry Log Ridge, Glass Rock Knob, Pinnacle, and Rocky Knob. This is currently the only section of the southern Blue Ridge front range, other than Grandfather Mountain, where this species has been reported in summer months.

The nest was located in the margin of a small forest gap at an elevation of 1564 m (5132 ft) along the crest line of Bald Knob Ridge, which runs east from the summit of Bald Knob and divides the headwaters of the South Toe River into left and right branches. The natural forest community along this upper portion of the ridge consists largely of red spruce, Fraser fir, and northern hardwoods. The vegetation in the area surrounding the nest site gap includes stands of mature spruce-fir and hardwood forest intermixed with areas of canopy disturbance that vary in extent and age. These include small to large gaps, recent tree-falls, extensive windthrows, and an irregular

mosaic of various stages of reforestation, with canopy and subcanopy seedlings and saplings, shrubs, grasses, sedges, ferns, and mosses. The long axis orientation of these gaps tends to be east-west, following the ridge line.

Subcanopy and reforestation species include seedlings and saplings, mainly of young red spruce, but also scattered yellow birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*), mountain ash (*Sorbus americana*), mountain maple (*Acer spicatum*), striped maple (*Acer pensylvanicum*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), mountain holly (*Ilex montana*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) and Fraser fir. Fire cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*) is notable here mostly in a larger, older, more extensively disrupted area approximately 30 m southeast of the nesting site. Allegheny blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*) is common in all the disturbed areas.

The ridge top at the nest site is about 40 to 60 m wide, fairly level and smooth, with little slope for about 25 m in both directions from the crest line. The gap is open overhead for an area approximately 5 m by 20 m, while the ground area involved in the gap is 10 by 25 m. The transition from the gap into the adjacent, mature spruce-fir forest is sharply demarcated on one side but irregular and uneven on the more disturbed opposite margin. The spruce-fir forest floor is largely open, with a spongy layer of spruce needles, small twigs, spruce cones, scattered seedlings, infrequent canopy saplings (e.g. Fraser fir, red spruce, yellow birch) and only a few shrub or herbaceous species. Other canopy species nearby include black cherry, yellow birch, and American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*). The largest red spruce in the contiguous forest have crown tops above 18 to 20 m and mean dbh values of 46 cm. The canopy coverage in the mature portions of the adjacent spruce-fir-hardwood forest is 90 to 95%.

Climate data are not available from the nest site. The closest station is 4.2 km (2.6 mi) due north on Mt. Mitchell, at 1902 m (6240 ft) elevation, where the normal monthly July mean temperature is 15.8° C (60.4° F). Using the approximation that each 1000 m elevation change is associated with a 6.5° C temperature change, an estimated value for the nest site would be 18.0° C (64.4° F). Mean annual precipitation at Mt. Mitchell is 189 cm (74.5 in), but given its elevation difference and prevailing wind direction, precipitation at the Bald Knob Ridge site is probably lower. Climate data for Hermit Thrush nesting areas reported in New York include mean July temperatures < 21° C (70° F) and annual precipitation > 89 cm (35 in). (Andrie and Carroll 1988). Mt. Mitchell data are from the State Climate Office of North Carolina (1971–2000).

### Nesting details

On 18 July 2011 we flushed an adult Hermit Thrush from an area of dense fern cover less than a half meter from the edge of Bald Knob Ridge Trail, as we hiked past the spot. Careful examination revealed a nest containing two turquoise-colored eggs (Fig. 1). When we returned on 20 July the nest contained two very recently hatched chicks. On 21 July we established an observation site 20 m from the nest. We visited the site every



Figure 1. Hermit Thrush nest with two eggs, 18 July 2011. Photo M.B. Simpson, Jr.

morning, except one, for the next 8 days and recorded all activities in the area for at least 2 to 5 hours daily. Total time on location was 21 hours 45 minutes. Photos of the nest were taken on two subsequent days, the last on 29 July (Fig. 2).

Two males were heard singing during the monitoring period, one within 50 m on all sides of the site, and another farther away to the north. The singing of one often induced the other to sing as well. The *chupp chupp* call



Figure 2. Hermit Thrush nest with two chicks, 29 July 2011. The second chick is hidden beneath the larger chick and by the shape of the nest. Photo by Todd Arcos.

notes were frequently heard within the singing area and near the nest, but the most common call heard was the slurred-up *vreeh* that resembles the call note of the Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*). The only other call was heard as we arrived at the site on the last day of observation, when a strange “wee”-like cry was heard repeatedly. The call became softer and ceased entirely after about 5 minutes.

The behavior of Hermit Thrushes at the nest was characteristically elusive. The adults were more cautious approaching the nest than when leaving, as departures were observed 68 times, approximately twice as often as arrivals. Departure was usually by flying up and out of the ferns for about a meter then moving laterally away. About a quarter of departures involved flying up to a nearby branch and pausing a few seconds before flying off. Although the nest and ground near the nest were shielded from our direct view by the fern layer, it was sometimes possible to detect the adults due to movement of the ferns, presumably from the birds jumping up into the nest from the ground below. On a few occasions adults were seen carrying caterpillars or small winged insects to the nest. Adults were observed flying directly into the nest only 14 times and hopping into the nest from the ground 15 times. The approaching adult occasionally flew down into the ferns 2 to 7 m from the nest a few seconds or a minute before the bird was seen hopping into the nest or fern movement at the nest site was observed.

Species noted in the vicinity of the nest every day of surveillance include Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*), Red-breasted



Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*), Winter Wren (*Troglodytes hyemalis*), Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*), Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*), Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedorum*), Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), and Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*). These species are mostly associated with mid-level and tree canopy, and only Winter Wren, Dark-eyed Junco, Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*), and a juvenile Hermit Thrush were observed within 3 to 5 m of the nest. Curiously, no Veeries (*Catharus fuscescens*) were heard or seen during our surveillance, although earlier in the season individuals were frequently noted here and were thought to be nesting. A juvenile Hermit Thrush (spotted back and complete tail) was driven away by one of the adults on 22 July, which suggests a previous nesting. The late date and small clutch size (two eggs) also suggest that this may have been a second or even third nesting.

The nest was examined on 30 July, after we noted that the adults were not present in the area during the two-hour period following our arrival. The nest was noted to be empty and damaged, with a 2 cm hole in the bottom and considerable flattening of one side. No trace of the chicks could be found.

Nest failure was probably due to predation, a very common outcome for this species (Jones and Donovan 1996). Candidate species would include bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*), Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter stratus*), or snakes such as timber rattler (*Crotalus horridus*) (Jones and Donovan 1996; Martin and Li 1992; Martin and Roper 1988; Sealy 1999). Northern Saw-whet Owls and Red Squirrels are regular in this area on Bald Knob Ridge (Simpson and Westphal, unpublished records).

### Nest description

The nest was embedded and well-concealed within a dense layer of hayscented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*), barely 30 cm from the edge of a narrow, lightly used hiking trail. The fern cover encompasses an irregular area of approximately 10 m by 20 m. Mostly along its margins and elsewhere in the gap floor are woodfern (*Dryopteris campyloptera*), southern lady fern (*Athyrium asplenoides*), blackberry, white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*), joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium* sp.), and scattered patches of moss.

The nest was positioned in the ferns beneath denuded branches of the upper crown of a downed spruce, the trunk of which is 60 to 135 cm above the ground at the nest site. The nest lip was 15 to 17 cm above the ground and slightly tilted due to the nest being anchored and partially embedded on a 1.5 cm diameter branch from the crown of the downed conifer. Live fronds of hayscented fern were incorporated into the nest structure and provided some balance and lateral stability. The nest was constructed mostly of short spruce twigs and contained some coarse grasses, sedge, and bark fragments, lined with fine grasses, mosses and small pieces of hayscented fern. The remains of the nest are now in the North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh.



## Discussion

The habitat at our nest and at Browning's (2003) fledgling site is consistent with that described for Hermit Thrush in other portions of its range (Dilger 1956; Jones and Donovan 1996). Preferred nesting locales include interior forest edges, particularly small clearings within wooded areas, created by disturbances such as individual tree death, logging, wind, and fire. The species also uses undisturbed sites, mostly those near interior forest edges, such as bogs and glades. In the east, the Hermit Thrush generally nests on the ground in natural depressions of knolls or hummocks, under small conifers that provide protective canopy, or in open woodland spaces with bunchberry or ferns. In a large series, 36% of nests were placed under a live non-woody plant, such as ferns, grasses, forbs, mosses or sedges, while 53% were under a live tree, shrub or sapling. Nests in the east ranged from ground level to 0.3 m, while those in western parts of the range are generally higher off the ground, placed in small tree branches, with some saddled on a branch or in fork or crotch of a branch (Jones and Donovan, 1996).

Disturbed interior forest edges and gaps are common in high elevation plant communities where Hermit Thrushes have become established in the southern Blue Ridge. From the 1880s through the 1930s, extensive logging and wildfires destroyed an estimated 90% of the spruce forests in the southern Appalachians (Korstian 1937). This period of largely wholesale removal was followed by an interval of relative stability, until the arrival in the mid-1950s of the balsam woolly adelgid (*Adelges piceae*), which attacks and destroys *Abies* species, including Fraser fir. Introduced into the United States in the early 1900s, the adelgid was initially discovered in the southern Blue Ridge at Mt. Mitchell in 1957 and subsequently at Roan Mountain by 1962, Great Smoky Mountains by 1970, and Richland Balsam by 1972. Heavily infested Fraser firs usually die within 2 to 7 years, resulting in catastrophic mortality of canopy, although abundant regeneration may occur in some areas (Eager 1984; Smith and Nicholas 2000).

The now widespread die-off of adult Fraser fir has created extensive blowdowns and canopy loss in the highest elevations, particularly above 1830 m (6000 ft), where fir typically occurs as the sole conifer. At lower elevations, red spruce becomes progressively the more common and dominant species, so that forest gaps of varying sizes are caused by the death of fir in these sites. With the loss of fir, the remaining red spruce become exposed to greater wind damage, resulting in blowdowns and further disruption and loss of canopy. Additional factors, including airborne pollutants and climate changes, are contributing to a decline in red spruce. The typically thin soil in spruce-fir forests increases the vulnerability of canopy trees to damage from ice storms, local windstorms, and hurricane remnants. The result is a complex mosaic of regenerating forest tracts, disturbed interior clearings, forest gaps, and irregular edges through most of the areas formerly occupied by mature spruce and fir forests. These adelgid-related changes in the spruce-fir-hardwood communities are substantially

different from those subsequent to earlier wholesale removal by logging and by wildfire (Busing and Pauley 1994; Eager 1984; Pyle and Schafale 1988).

If internal forest gaps contribute to the spread of Hermit Thrush in the southern Blue Ridge, then reforestation dynamics are important in that process. An obviously critical component of reforestation is the successful establishment of seedlings and saplings of successional and canopy species. Hayscented fern is a common herbaceous species that has been shown elsewhere to interfere with forest regeneration in gaps and forest edges by inhibiting woody seedlings of certain species, thereby tending to perpetuate these gaps. In turn, processes that maintain an open, disturbed canopy enhance perpetuation of hayscented fern, which thrives on direct sunlight and often spreads widely as a nearly continuous dense layer (George and Bazzaz 1999; Hill and Silander 2001; Horsley 1993). The extent to which these phenomena are relevant in disturbed southern Appalachian spruce-fir forests remains undefined, and to date studies have not examined the effects of *Dennstaedtia* on Fraser fir or red spruce reproduction (James Runkle pers. comm.; Alejandro Royo pers. comm.; Royo and Carson 2006; Sarah Schliemann pers. comm.; Stephen B. Horsley pers. comm.; Peter S. White pers. comm.). The potential role of delayed or arrested reforestation in spruce-fir forests requires additional study, particularly in light of the complex structure, vegetation, and dynamics of forest gaps. Important reviews of gap ecology and research issues have been recently published by Royo and Carson (2006) and by Schliemann and Bockheim (2011).

In the case of ground nesters, such as Hermit Thrush, hayscented fern may provide excellent cover for the nest. The present report and Browning's (2003) discovery of three fledglings involved large areas of hayscented fern within tree-fall gaps. In northwest Pennsylvania, long-term studies in managed northern hardwood forests demonstrated that experimental removal of hayscented fern was associated with a reduction in the number of nesting Hermit Thrushes (Stoleson et al 2011). Stoleson (pers. comm.) reports that five of the eight Hermit Thrush nests discovered during their research were located within hayscented fern.

## Conclusions

Evidence has accumulated over the past 15 years that Hermit Thrushes breed in high-elevation forests of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee. The nest monitored at Bald Knob Ridge, Yancey County, NC, from 18 through 30 July 2011 provides further documentation of breeding in this region. Tree-fall gaps and other disturbed forest interior sites in spruce-fir and northern hardwood communities may be important by creating conditions favorable to the nesting requirements of this species in the southern Blue Ridge. In some situations, hayscented fern may contribute to Hermit Thrush reproductive success by providing dense protective cover for nests. Aggressive herbaceous and understory species may also support nesting of Hermit Thrushes by slowing restoration of the mature forest in gaps and other disturbed areas favored by the thrush.

Because nests have not heretofore been reported in the NC/TN Blue Ridge, insufficient data are available for assessing the extent to which the spread of Hermit Thrush is related to internal gaps and disturbed edge. Further research is needed to define factors that contribute to the establishment of the Hermit Thrush as a breeding bird in the region.

### Acknowledgments

We are indebted to Rachel Dellinger, Rick Knight, Andrew Laughlin, Dan Pittillo, Phil Shelton, Scott Stoleson, and William Sullivan for data and commentary.

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## 2010 Annual Report of the South Carolina Bird Records Committee

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**Donna Slyce<sup>1</sup>, Chair, Giff Beaton, Lex Glover, Chris Hill,  
J. B. Hines III, Will Post, Steve Wagner**  
*<sup>1</sup> 304 Diamond Lane, Ridgeway, SC 29130*

In 2010, the South Carolina Bird Records Committee completed action on two records, both of which were accepted. One of the reports added a new species to the state list in the Definitive category. A report of a California Gull photographed at the Horry County landfill in early January of 2010 that was photographed and well described by Chris Hill placed the species on the state list. At the end of 2010, several additional reports had been received by the committee and were in circulation.

Committee membership was unchanged in 2010. The number of the committee remains at seven.

The current state list stands at 455 species, with 16 Provisional II species and 14 Hypothetical species. The most recent revision of the state list can be found online at <http://www.carolinabirdclub.org/brc>. The state list available online includes review categories in addition to list categories for each species.

Committee activity is reviewed below.

### Reports accepted:

**Arctic Tern** (12-09-04): A specimen salvaged from Debidue Beach in May of 2009 was documented and photographed by Chris Hill (Hill et al. 2010). His report, including a thorough write-up and numerous diagnostic photographs, was accepted unanimously by the committee. This report is only a second report of the species in the state. The specimen has been archived in the Charleston Museum of Natural History.

**California Gull** (01-10-01): A single bird of this species was picked out from among thousands of Herring Gulls at Horry county landfill in early January of 2010 by Chris Hill (2010). The well-organized write-up included numerous diagnostic photographs of the reported bird among the Herring Gulls that provided relative size and plumage difference comparisons to be made by the reviewing members. The record was accepted unanimously. Due to the inclusion of photographs, this report adds the species to the Definitive category of the state list.

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- Hill, C. E. 2010. First record of California Gull (*Larus californicus*) for South Carolina. Chat 74:102–103.  
Hill, C. E., T. Marshall, and W. B. Allen. 2010. First specimen of Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) for South Carolina. Chat 74:40–43.

**Corrigenda to the 2009 Annual Report**

1. The acceptance of the Broad-billed Hummingbird record with photographs promoted the species from Provisional I to Definitive status. The Annual Report noted that it was only the second record but did not mention the status change.
2. The record of White-winged Dove was from Okatie, Beaufort County. The editor incorrectly changed the county name to Jasper County. The community of Okatie is in Jasper County but the zip code spans both counties.

*Received 29 October 2011*

## General Field Notes

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*General Field Notes* briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

*First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.*

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### Second Nesting Record of Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) in North Carolina

**Zora L. Rhodes<sup>1</sup> and Jerry L. Johnson<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> 143 Forest Hills Drive, Mill Spring, NC 28756

<sup>2</sup> 4004 Lake Adger Parkway, Mill Spring, NC 28756

*icbirds@windstream.net*

In recent years, there have been regular sightings of Common Mergansers (*Mergus merganser*) along the Green River in Polk County, NC. In the spring and early summer of 2008, Jay Davies, former fishery biologist, and Master Officer Toby Jenkins of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission made several sightings of a female Common Merganser with young on the lower Green River where it flows into Lake Adger in Polk County, North Carolina. These sightings were not reported or documented at that time.

Later that year on the 2008 Tryon, NC, Christmas Bird Count, Davies and Zora Rhodes saw and recorded a male Common Merganser on the lower Green River near Lake Adger. Subsequently, several male and female Common Mergansers have been seen on the Green River and Lake Adger and were recorded for the 2009 and 2010 Tryon, NC, Christmas Bird Counts.

Davies, Jenkins, Rhodes, Jerry Johnson, and others saw the birds continually throughout the winter months of 2011. Davies saw a pair of Common Mergansers sitting together on a rock in the Green River at the end of March 2011.

#### Evidence of nesting

On 5 June 2011, Jennifer Metzger took a picture of a female merganser with young on the Green River near Lake Adger and submitted it to Jenkins. On 13 June, after several attempts by Johnson and Rhodes to document the female, Johnson was able to take a close-up photograph with a Canon 50D 75-300 IS while kayaking (Fig.1). The photograph captures the female's





Figure 1. Female Common Merganser with 10 young on 13 June 2011 on Green River near Lake Adger. White throat patch confirms identification as female Common Merganser. Photo by Jerry Johnson.

white throat patch, which confirms that she was indeed a Common Merganser, and it shows her with approximately 10 young.

On 25 June, while canoeing the lower Green River into Lake Adger, Davies and Rhodes counted 11 Common Mergansers grouped together. On 28 June, Johnson photographed 11 Common Mergansers verifying the female Common Merganser with 10 young (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Group of 11 Common Mergansers photographed on Green River, 28 June 2011. Photo by Jerry Johnson.

On 8 July, Jenkins photographed 16 Common Mergansers on Lake Adger. On 10 July, Johnson also counted the 16 birds together on the lower Green River. This crèche of juveniles suggests that more than one brood of Common Mergansers may be present in the area.

The 13 June photo was submitted to and verified by several members of the NC Bird Records Committee, making this the second record of a Common Merganser nesting in North Carolina. The first record was documented in 1938 when a pair nested successfully in a stump at Bennett's Pond in Chowan County, NC (Potter et al. 1980).

## Discussion

Since the early 1990s, there have been several Common Mergansers reported during the summer months on Lake Jordan in the eastern piedmont of North Carolina but without known nesting (LeGrand 1990). The Green River nesting record may indicate a return of this species to its former range. According to historical research by David S. Lee (1999):

The Common Merganser breeds throughout the forested boreal Holarctic. In eastern North America it presently nests only sporadically south of New England. Brimley (1941) reported the species as nesting in Chowan County, NC, in 1938. Kiff (1989) reviewed historical information, obtained unpublished museum egg data, and concluded that the species historically nested throughout much of the southeastern United States. He mentioned records from western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and Tennessee, and he cited a report from Audubon of nesting in Kentucky. Thus, it appears that nesting in the South was formerly widespread and that the local decline of these birds corresponds with the time beavers (*Castor canadensis*) disappeared from the region. Common Mergansers also experienced a breeding range contraction in Europe in this same general time period.

With the return of the beaver to North Carolina, there should be den trees for nesting cavities available throughout the state (Potter et al. 2006). The section of the Green River where the Common Mergansers are found provides good nesting habitat for these ducks similar to good nesting habitat found on forested stream sites farther north. Starting in Henderson County, North Carolina, the Green River flows first into Lake Summit, which catches much of its sediment load. Next, it flows through the Green River Game Lands before it reaches Lake Adger. This section is rather pristine with secondary-growth forests and several beaver dams. Thus, there are many large den trees with cavities excavated by Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*). These cavities provide good nesting sites, a known limiting factor for the Common Merganser.

Being a piscivorous species, the Common Merganser needs an abundance of aquatic invertebrates and fish to rear its young. In fact, it is an important

indicator species for the health of aquatic ecosystems (Mallory and Metz 1999). According to William T. Russ II, Western Aquatic Wildlife Diversity Biologist for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (pers. comm.), this section of the Green River where the birds are found has very good water quality. Based on a 6 May 2010 fish sample at a boating access area on Green River, it has one of the highest counts for diversity and abundance of fish in the Broad River Basin, which includes the Green River.

Johnson, Rhodes, and others plan to monitor the presence of the Common Merganser in the lower part of the Green River flowing into Lake Adger in the coming years.

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## BRIEFS FOR THE FILES

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Josh Southern  
203 Hyannis Drive  
Holly Springs, NC 27540  
joshsouthern79@gmail.com

(All dates Summer 2011, unless otherwise noted)

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*Briefs for the Files is a seasonal collection of uncommon-to-rare or unusual North and South Carolina bird sightings and events which do not necessarily require a more detailed Field Note or article. Reports of your sightings are due the 20th of the month after the end of the previous season.*

Winter	December 1–February 28	due March 20
Spring	March 1–May 31	due June 20
Summer	June 1–July 31	due August 20
Fall	August 1–November 30	due December 20

*Reports may be submitted in any format, but I prefer that you use email, list multiple sightings in taxonomic order (rather than by date or location), and type your report directly into the body of the email. If your sightings are in a file, please copy-and-paste the text into the body of the email, rather than sending an attachment.*

*Suitable reports for the Briefs include any sightings you feel are unusual, rare, noteworthy, or just plain interesting to you in any way! It is my responsibility to decide which reports merit inclusion in the Briefs.*

*Please be sure to include details of any rare or hard-to-identify birds.*

*I rely in part on sightings reported in Carolinabirds. Please don't, however, rely on me to pick up your sightings from Carolinabirds. Instead, please also send your sightings directly to me as described above.*

*If I feel that your sighting warrants a Field Note, I will contact either you or the appropriate state Field Notes editor. You may, of course, submit your Field Note directly to the editor without going through me.*

**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck:** Sixteen were counted at Donnelley Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Colleton Co, SC, 4 June (Ron Clark).

**Mottled Duck:** Much farther inland than all previous NC sightings was that of an individual at Riverbend Park in Conover, NC, 24 July through 5 Aug (Dwayne Martin, m.obs.).

**Ring-necked Duck:** For the second year in a row, a drake spent the summer on Salem Lake in Winston-Salem, NC (John Haire). The bird seen on the

Spring Bird Count (SBC) remained on Yates Mill Pond in Raleigh, NC, until at least 25 June (Erla Beegle, et al.).

**Lesser Scaup:** Two males remained on the waterfront in Morehead City, NC, throughout the summer (John Fussell). An individual was seen on the retention pond next to Concord Mills Mall in Concord, NC, 19 June (Jeff Lemons).

**Common Eider:** A lingering female was found in the Beaufort Channel, off the Rachel Carson Preserve, Beaufort, NC, 2 June (John Fussell, Paula Gillikin).

**Surf Scoter:** A juvenile male was seen at the ferry terminal on Ocracoke Island, NC, 10 June (Ali Iyoob, Nathan Swick, Chris Ciccone). A female was seen in the surf off S Nags Head, NC, 8 July (Audrey Whitlock).

**Common Merganser:** A female with ten juveniles in tow was photographed on the Green River in Polk Co, NC, 14 June (Jerry Johnson, Zora Rhodes). According to the observers, this bird has raised young at this location for the past three years. There is only one previous report of this species breeding in our region.

**Red-breasted Merganser:** Lingering into summer were individual females just inside Oregon Inlet, NC, 15 June (Audrey Whitlock), and near the jetty at Huntington Beach State Park (SP), SC, 21 June (Paul Serridge).

**Common Loon:** Three, one adult in breeding plumage and two juveniles were seen on Lookout Shoals Lake in Catawba Co, NC, 18 and 25 June (Monroe Pannell). Two loons were also on Jordan Lake, NC, 25 June (Phil Warren). Both reports are interesting because most previous reports of summering loons on inland lakes are of individuals.

**Herald (Trindade) Petrel:** One was photographed from a NOAA research ship off South Carolina, 28 June (Tom Johnson), providing the state with its first record. Two were seen from the same ship, 80+ nautical miles SSE of Cape Hatteras, NC, 2 July (Johnson, *fide* Brian Patteson). Two were seen on a pelagic trip out of Hatteras, NC, 17 July (Patteson, et al.).

**Fea's Petrel:** One was photographed from a NOAA research ship, 80+ nautical miles SSE of Cape Hatteras, NC, 2 July (Tom Johnson, *fide* Brian Patteson).

**White-tailed Tropicbird:** The spring's impressive counts continued on pelagic trips out of Hatteras, NC, with three on 12 June, one on 31 July, and four to five on 17 July (Brian Patteson, et al.). Five adults were seen from a NOAA research ship in the Gulf Stream, within 75 miles of the NC coast, 1 July (Tom Johnson).

**Red-billed Tropicbird:** Singles were noted on a pelagic trip out of Hatteras, NC, 11 July (Brian Patteson, et al.) and from a NOAA research ship in the Gulf Stream, within 75 miles of the NC coast, 1 July (Tom Johnson).

**Wood Stork:** Flocks of post-breeding wanderers were found at two sites in the NC coastal plain—along the Black River, on the border of Bladen and Pender Co, NC, where about 40 were counted 18 June (David Stahle, Katheryn Perkins, Angie Carl, Daniel Griffin, Charles Robbins, Larry



White-tailed Tropicbird, 12 June 2011, off Hatteras, NC. Photo by Nathan Swick.

Myers, *fide* John Carpenter); and in a Carolina Bay near Orrum, Robeson Co, NC, where 30+ were seen during the period (*fide* Harry LeGrand).

**Magnificent Frigatebird:** One, either a female or a third/fourth year male, was seen flying up the coast at Surf City, NC (Paul Glass) and two hours later in Emerald Isle, NC, 5 July (Bo Howes). An adult male was seen soaring high over the ocean off Salvo, NC, 29 July (Bob Ake, Audrey Whitlock).

**Brown Booby:** A juvenile was photographed on the dunes at the S end of Wrightsville Beach, NC, 25 June (Tim Armstrong) but never relocated.

**Great Cormorant:** Immature birds were seen at Oregon Inlet, NC, 3 July (Jeff Lewis) and at the S end of Wrightsville Beach, NC, 16 July (Sam Cooper). It's been ten years since our region's last sighting of this species during the summer period.

**Anhinga:** One at Aberdeen Lake in Moore Co, NC, 15 June (Rex Badgett, *fide* Susan Campbell) was locally unusual.



Great Cormorant, 3 July 2011, Pea Is NWR, NC. Photo by Jeff Lewis.

**Brown Pelican:** An immature bird at Falls Lake, NC, 28 June (Ali Iyoob) was a good find for a site so far inland.

**Least Bittern:** One in a yard in Boiling Springs, NC, 11 June (Art Bottoms) was unusual for the mountain region.

**Little Blue Heron:** A first-spring bird was present at Salem Lake in Winston-Salem, NC, 3–5 June (John Haire) and a juvenile bird was present at the same location, 13–14 July (Carol Cunningham). Three juveniles were at Lake Wheeler, Wake Co, NC, 9 July (Steve Shultz).

**Reddish Egret:** Two were seen at Hatteras Inlet, NC, 10 June (Ali Iyoob, Nathan Swick, Chris Ciccone). Three were reported from Hammocks Beach SP, NC, 13 July (*vide* Derb Carter).

**Yellow-crowned Night-Heron:** A juvenile seen out in the Gulf Stream during a pelagic trip out of Hatteras, NC, 31 July (Brian Patteson, et al.) was unusual.

**White Ibis:** Inland sightings of post-breeding wanderers included one between Hickory and Lenoir, NC, 29 June (Dwayne Martin); a juvenile in Edneyville, NC, 29 June (Chris Bollar); three juveniles in NW Durham, NC, 5 July (Norm Budnitz); five juveniles at Lake Wheeler, Wake Co, NC, 10 July (Nathan Swick); a juvenile at the Municipal Golf Course in Asheville, NC, 8–11 July (*vide* Joan Carr); 16 juveniles at Lynn's Nursery in Leicester, Buncombe Co, NC, for two weeks in early July (Doug Johnston, Len Pardue); a juvenile on the Davidson River in Brevard, NC, 13 July (Norma Siebenheller, Wayne Forsythe); a juvenile in NW Mecklenburg Co, NC, 23 July (John Bonestell); a juvenile along the French Broad River, N of Asheville, NC, 17 July (Caroline Eastman); and one at Hooper Lane in Henderson Co, NC, 17 July (Paul Super).

**Roseate Spoonbill:** Sightings included six at Bear Island WMA, Colleton Co, SC, 9 June (Cherrie Sneed); one at Pleasant Point Plantation in Beaufort Co, SC, 14 June (Buddy Campbell); two at Huntington Beach SP, SC, 6 July (Jerry Kerschner, Jack Peachey); and a juvenile on Lady's Island in Beaufort, SC, 15–17 July (Campbell).

**Swallow-tailed Kite:** Some of the better counts were 14 over a field off NC-87 on the outskirts of Riegelwood, NC, 12 June (John Ennis); and 40+ over fields near Allendale, SC, 16 July (Sparkle Clark, Carroll Richard, Ron Wright).

**Mississippi Kite:** Outside of the species' typical breeding range was one in Charlotte, NC, 6 June (Ron Clark) and an active nest in a residential area of Greensboro, NC, in late July (Scott DePue, *vide* Henry Link).



Roseate Spoonbill, 7 July 2011, Huntington Beach SP, SC. Photo by Jerry Kerschner.



**Broad-winged Hawk:** Two were seen and heard in the Green Swamp of Brunswick Co, NC, 1 July (Mike Turner), suggestive of breeding in that area.

**King Rail:** One in Buxton, NC, 3 June (Jeff Lewis) was found in unusually salty/brackish habitat more typical of a Clapper Rail.

**American Coot:** One on Lookout Shoals Lake in Catawba Co, NC, 18 June (Monroe Pannell) was unusual for the region in summer.

**Sandhill Crane:** One, reportedly quite tame, spent the day at a condominium development in Salter Path, NC, 4 July (Betty Stierhoff, *fide* John Fussell).

**Wilson's Plover:** One near the ferry terminal in Cedar Island, NC, 31 July (John Fussell, Jack Fennell) was locally unusual.

**Piping Plover:** Sightings included four to five on the E end of Bear Island, Hammocks Beach SP, NC, in early June (John Voigt); and two on Kiawah Island, SC, 15 July (Aaron Given).

**Black-necked Stilt:** A good count of 46 was made in New Field, Pea Island NWR, NC, 28 July (Audrey Whitlock, Greg Moyers).

**Spotted Sandpiper:** One at the dam on Mayo Millpond in Nash Co, NC, 5 June (Ricky Davis) was somewhat late for a spring migrant. Early fall migrants included six at the ferry terminal in Cedar Island, NC, 3 July (John Fussell, Jack Fennell) and three at Lake Wheeler, Wake Co, NC, 9 July (Steve Shultz).

**Marbled Godwit:** Respectable mid-summer counts included eight on Harbor Island, Beaufort Co, SC, 23–25 June (Don Martin) and 16 at Captain Sam's Inlet, Charleston Co, SC, 6 July (Cherrie Sneed, Aija & Ed Konrad).

**White-rumped Sandpiper:** Four at Salem Lake in Winston-Salem, NC, 20–21 June (John Haire) must have been very late spring migrants.

**Short-billed Dowitcher:** One found at Cane Creek Reservoir, Orange Co, NC, 9 July (Jacob Socolar, Carlos Peres) was unusual for a site so far inland.

**Red-necked Phalarope:** A pair, one of which was in breeding plumage, was found on North Pond, Pea Island NWR, NC, 12 June (Scott Winton).

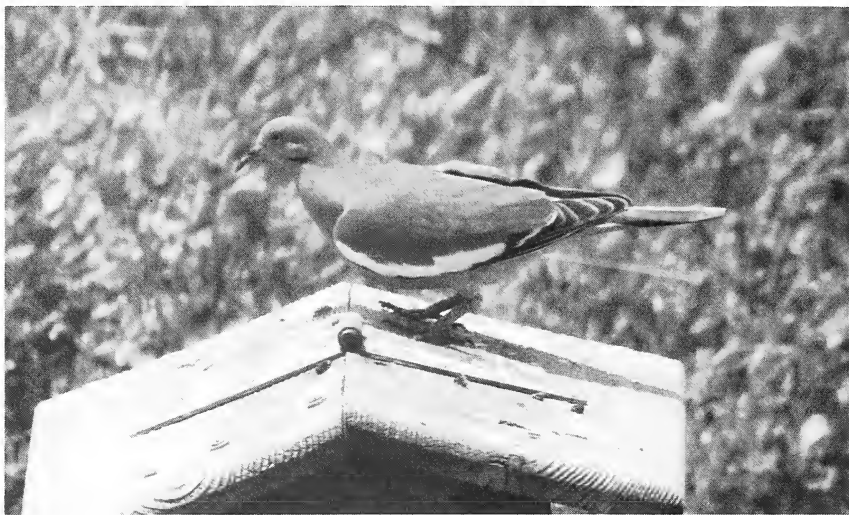
**Lesser Black-backed Gull:** 37 were counted around a sand dredging operation at S Nags Head, NC, 23 July (Audrey Whitlock), providing an excellent summer count.

**Least Tern:** Two seen on Lake Crabtree, Wake Co, NC, 15 June (Thierry Besançon) were unusual for a site so far from the coast.

**Roseate Tern:** Two were reported from Cape Point, Buxton, NC, 15 July (Brian Taber, *fide* Ned Brinkley).

**South Polar Skua:** Three, two of which were feeding on a recently-killed Black-capped Petrel, were seen during a pelagic trip out of Hatteras, NC, 11 July (Brian Patteson, et al.). An individual was also seen on a pelagic trip, 17 July (Patteson, et al.).

**Eurasian Collared-Dove:** One seen on Roanoke Island, NC, 2 July (Jeff Lewis) was a first for that island, though colonies are established in nearby Nags Head, NC.



White-winged Dove, 12 June 2011, Pea Island NWR. Photo by Scott Winton.

**White-winged Dove:** Sightings on the Outer Banks of NC continued into summer, with individuals seen at Pea Island NWR, NC, 11–12 June (Will Cook, Scott Winton); and at a feeder in North Ridge, Nags Head, NC, 29 June (*vide* Jeff Lewis). One was also seen on Bald Head Island, NC, 15 July (Brian O'Shea).

**Mourning Dove:** One to four seen throughout the season at Carver's Gap (5550+ ft), Roan Mountain, NC, were unusual for such a high elevation (Rick Knight).

**Nanday (Black-hooded) Parakeet:** An individual continued to be seen in downtown Morehead City, NC, throughout the period (John Fussell).

**Alder Flycatcher:** Sightings included two to six on Roan Mountain, NC, throughout the period (Rick Knight); three on territory at Black Balsam Mountain, near milepost 418 on the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP), NC, 13 June (Steve Compton); and ten along the Appalachian Trail near Roan Mountain, NC, 17–19 June (Jacob Socolar, Ali Iyooob, Scott Winton).



Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, 26 June 2011, near Pendleton, SC. Photo by Linda Montgomery.

**Scissor-tailed Flycatcher:** A female joined the male at last year's nesting site along Gunter Rd, near Piedmont, SC, 17 June (Cherrie Sneed), almost two months after the male arrived, though nesting was never confirmed. A male was seen at Forestview High School in Gastonia, NC, 15–24 June (Sam Braxton, Jeff Lemons, Keith Camburn), only a few miles from the country club where a male was seen



Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, 23 July 2011, Anilorac Farm. Photo by Jeff Lewis.

in June 2009. A pair successfully nested at the Simpson Research Center near Pendleton, SC, as a nest with four juveniles atop a utility pole was first noted 26 June (Rob Gentry, Scott Davis). A pair was found nesting on an antenna at Anilorac Farm in Orange Co, NC, 9 July (Jacob Socolar), and nestlings were photographed at the site 23 July (Jeff Lewis).

**Loggerhead Shrike:** A pair successfully nested on Pivers Island, near Beaufort, NC, as fledglings were noted 18 June (John Fussell, Paula Gillikin). This sighting may represent the first breeding record of this species in Carteret County since 1975.

**Warbling Vireo:** A singing individual continued along the shore of Lookout Shoals Lake, Catawba Co, NC, 18 and 25 June (Monroe Pannell).

**Common Raven:** Five, two adults and three juveniles, were seen at the Vulcan Rock Quarry in Charlotte, NC, 6 June (Ron Clark, Tom Sanders) where breeding was also confirmed last year.

**Horned Lark:** Eleven, including four juveniles, were counted at the Oakland Plantation Turf Farm in Bladen Co, NC, 3 June (Daniel Hueholt). A flock of 35 at North River Farms, Carteret Co, NC, 12 June (John Fussell, Jack Fennell) was an unusually large concentration for the breeding season. Two heard singing at the same location, 16 June (Fussell), was suggestive of breeding at that location. Breeding was confirmed on the bald of Bearwallow Mountain, NE of Hendersonville, NC, as a pair was seen gathering food 2 and 17 June (Wayne Forsythe) and two adults and a juvenile were seen 2 July (Henry Link, et al.).

**Cliff Swallow:** Nesting around Havelock, NC, on the Hampton Inn and two nearby bridges, evidenced by 110 nests on 8 June (John Fussell) seemed "later than one might expect". According to Fussell, "the timing of the nesting seemed to coincide with the worsening drought and presence of

exposed bottoms of storm water retention ponds, which provided access to wet clay.”

**Swainson's Thrush:** One was noted between mileposts 355 and 360 along the BRP, NC, 1 July (Marilyn Westphal, Mark Simpson). One was heard along the Appalachian Trail near Round Bald, Roan Mountain, NC, 17 June (Jacob Socolar, Ali Iyoob, Scott Winton) and 23 June (Scott Somershoe). Strong evidence of this species breeding in NC has not yet been obtained.

**Hermit Thrush:** Two to three were heard singing on Roan Mountain, NC, throughout the season, and a juvenile was seen 22 July (Rick Knight). Individuals were also heard singing on Mt Mitchell, NC, 18 June (Jacob Socolar, Ali Iyoob, Scott Winton); near Andrews Bald, near Clingmans Dome in Swain Co, NC, 9 July (Dean Edwards); and at Elk Knob SP, Watauga Co, NC, at dawn on 31 July, at 4926 ft (Merrill Lynch, Parker Backstrom).

**Brown Thrasher:** Two seen at Carver's Gap (5500+ ft), Roan Mountain, NC/TN border, throughout the season (Rick Knight) were unusual for such a high elevation.



Fledgling Cedar Waxwing, 7 July 2011, Camden, SC. Photo by Kurt Krucke.

**Cedar Waxwing:** A fledgling was photographed in a yard in Camden, SC, 7 July (Kurt Krucke). Two were intermittently seen in Wilmington, NC, throughout the period (Sam Cooper).

**Magnolia Warbler:** Three to four singing males were observed on Roan Mountain, NC, 20 May through 1 July (Rick Knight). An adult male along the shore of Lookout Shoals Lake, Catawba Co, NC, 21 July (Monroe Pannell) must have been an early fall migrant.

**Blackpoll Warbler:** Two heard in S Nags Head, NC, 6 June (Audrey Whitlock) were somewhat late.

**Yellow-rumped Warbler:** Two were seen at Carver's Gap, next to Roan High Knob, NC/TN border, 18 June (Jacob Socolar, Ali Iyoob, Scott Winton). Their presence at this date suggested breeding.

**Bachman's Sparrow:** One found at the end of Doyle Bottom Rd in the Clemson Experimental Forest, Pickens Co, SC, 10 June (Jessica Gorzo) was a first for that area.

**Chipping Sparrow:** Two singing males at the Cloudland parking lot (~6100 ft), Roan Mountain, NC, 14 June (Rick Knight) were unusual for that high elevation.

**Vesper Sparrow:** Two to three singing males were observed on Round Bald and at Engine Gap, Roan Mountain, NC, throughout the season (Rick Knight).

**Swamp Sparrow:** One that visited a feeder at Riverbend Park in Conover, NC, 9 July (Dwayne Martin) was unusual for the summer season.

**White-throated Sparrow:** An adult was present in a yard in Cary, NC, 7 June through the end of the period (Kevin Markham). Another adult was seen in Charlotte, NC, during the second week of June (*fide* Ron Clark). An individual was seen at the Prairie Ridge Ecostation in Raleigh, NC, 24 July (Brian O'Shea) but not seen again.

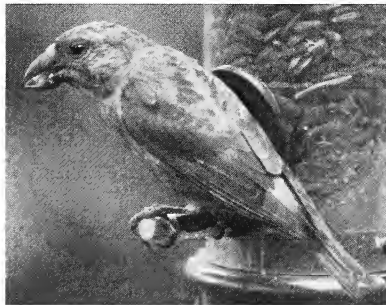
**Indigo Bunting:** Two to three singing males were observed on Roan Mountain, at ~5600 ft, 14 June through the end of the period (Rick Knight).

**Dickcissel:** 30 singing males were counted at North River Farms in Carteret Co, NC, 12 June (John Fussell, Jack Fennell), providing a high count for that location. A male was seen singing in a field in Drake, Nash Co, NC, 4 June through mid-July (Ricky Davis). One was seen at Dobbins Farm in Townville, SC, 13 June (Bob & Judy Maxwell). A pair was found along Mid Pines Rd in Raleigh, NC, 25 June (Erla Beegle, et al.) and was present until at least 30 June (John Connors). Three, a male and two females, were seen at Ft Fisher, NC, 1–2 July (Bruce Smithson, Greg Massey).



Dickcissel, 25 June 2011, Mid Pines Rd, Raleigh, NC. Photo by James Meehan.

**Red Crossbill:** Four or more were seen throughout the season on Roan Mountain, NC (Rick Knight). About ten were seen at Carver's Gap, Roan



Red Crossbill, 25 July 2011, Grandfather Mountain, NC. Photo by Jeff Lewis.

Mountain, NC/TN border, 18 June (Jacob Socolar, Ali Iyoob, Scott Winton). A pair was found along the Bald Knob Ridge trail, adjacent to Mt Mitchell, NC, 1 July (Marilyn Westphal, Mark Simpson).

**Pine Siskin:** Two to eight were seen throughout the season on Roan Mountain, NC (Rick Knight). Seven were noted around Mt Mitchell, NC, 1 July (Marilyn Westphal, Mark Simpson).

## Fifty Years Ago in *The Chat*—December 1961

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In the December 1961 issue of *The Chat*, the lead article was "Some Aspects of the Fall Shorebird Migration at Southport, N.C. in 1961" by T. L. Quay and D. A. Adam. They described flight paths of transient shorebirds.

General Field Notes reported a number of interesting observations. Joseph R. Norwood reported on a nesting of Pileated Woodpeckers in Mecklenburg County. Apparently the species had been seen in the county only once previously. William Post, Jr. described a previously undiscovered heron rookery on Hilton Head Island, populated by hundreds of herons and White Ibis. Also, Mr. and Mrs. David McG. Harrall reported a Great White Heron from Hilton Head Island. General Field Notes editor B. R. Chamberlain commented that as the species had "never been taken in South Carolina", it "should be on the state Hypothetical List". William Post, Jr. reported another record of Coot nesting in SC. This nest was in Barnwell County and was only the second nesting record for the state. Mrs. Ellison D. Smith reported that Least Terns were again nesting at Lake Murray, SC, where they had first been found the previous year. Richard H. Siler reported finding Red-cockaded Woodpeckers nesting near Seven Springs in Wayne County, NC. Strangely, editor Chamberlain commented that "Wayne County is farther inland than most nesting sites recorded in North Carolina". Gaston Gage reported a nest of Barn Swallows near Clemson, SC. This was the first nesting record for the state, other than along the coast. J. Fred Denton reported nesting of Baltimore Orioles in North Augusta, SC, apparently the first nesting record for the state since 1943.

The CBC fall field trip was held at Clemson, SC, 6–8 Oct 1961, with 75 members attending.

In Briefs for the Files, it was reported that two singing male Bachman's Warblers were found in Charleston County, SC between 19 March and the third week of May. "One was watched by scores of observers, the location of the second bird being withheld for its protection."

—Kent Fiala, editor

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Katherine Higgins CBC, 1809 Lakepark Drive, Raleigh NC 27612 [hq@carolinabirdclub.org](mailto:hq@carolinabirdclub.org)

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